The uncertainties of patronage about the origins of documentary cinema in India and in the British Empire

Denis Vidal

THE UNCERTAINTIES OF PATRONAGE

ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF DOCUMENTARY CINEMA IN INDIA AND IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE

- Denis Vidal -

From the turn of this century, the best studies about any form of art have been generally based on the similar notion. What is shared in all these works is not very controversial notion that in order to understand better the style and the meaning of any work of art, one may learn a lot by analysing in detail how it expresses the social and cultural background, the economic, political and economic interests or even the more individual expectation of its patrons and audiences. This is certainly the methodological approach used by some of the best art historians such as Aby Warburg, Michael Baxandall, Svetlana Alpers or, Salvatore Settis. But it also characterizes the works of historians such as Carlo Ginzburg or Simon Schamma, and sociologists of art such as Pierre Bourdieu.

Now, it may sound a bit embarrassing to mention such references in introduction to a paper, which is dedicated essentially to the study of the first decades of documentary film making in the British Empire and in India. It is not so much that documentary films should not be regarded as art. Lenin or Goebbels were not alone in considering cinema to be the art of the twentieth century; and as far as the documentary tradition is concerned, there were many who considered it one of the most creative aspects of film making in these years. No, the problem lies elsewhere: in the fact that the social dimension of it seems so intrinsic to documentary film that one might wonder whether focusing on it from an anthropological perspective can possibly yield any new perspective.

One should certainly not deny the merit of someone like Bourdieu when he feels the necessity of demystifying idealist conceptions of art; but neither is one surprised that his demonstrations are mostly based on the his study of art and literature of very specific circles of the French intelligentsia at the end of the nineteenth century. Personally, I have never been entirely convinced that the notion of 'art for art sake' was ever as dominating an ideology as art historians and sociologists of art are wont to make out of it. I would be even inclined to believe that if there is a pervasive ideology of art in this century, it is not so much the idea that art transcends historical and social constraints; but rather cultural works are too easily assumed to symbolize the time and the milieu in which they are made, which is obviously very different.

Returning to the case of documentary films, no one would regard such films exclusively as 'pure art'. And if anyone were tempted to underplay their sociological dimension, the filmmakers would be the first to object because they have always been anxious to convince potential patrons of the various social implications of their work. Then there are no great merits in discovering that most documentaries convey specific economic, political, or ideological messages. It is certainly fascinating and worthwhile to discover the hidden religious messages that Venetian patrons encouraged painters like Corregio to hide in an enigmatic masterpiece like the *Tempest*; but less credit should be given to the person who discovers that a documentary film like the *Triumph of the Will* by Leni Riefenstahl is an apology for Nazism.

Nevertheless, I would like to argue that while there is not any doubt that the origins of documentary film tradition in the British Empire and in India are explicitly linked to propaganda, this does not mean, even in this case, that it reflects the aesthetics and ideology of a specific milieu in any simplistic manner. Indeed, I shall argue that more often than not, propaganda failed to correspond to the expectations of both patrons and audience.

I would even like to suggest that the failures of the documentary film movement lie precisely in the fact that it was able to develop in a strange vacuum where it remained surprisingly immune both to patron and the audiences' expectations. If this is true, such a case should have interesting implications for reconsidering the nature and logic of patronage. But let me deal with the specifics.

Herrings and Christmas Pudding

The very beginnings of the British Documentary Film Movement seem to provide an exemplary showcase for materialist historians of culture. It is, indeed, one of these rare cases where all the necessary elements of information are there for demonstrating both how and why the definition and the promotion of a new artistic medium resulted from political decisions that were a direct consequence of well-defined economic interests. Moreover this case makes it easy to trace the convertibility of different forms of capital (economic, political, familial, cultural, etc.), in other words, to make some Bourdieu-like interpretation.

After the WWI, the conservative party in Great Britain was particularly worried not only about the political decline of the country but also about its economic decline resulting from its gradual loosening of grip over the British Empire. One of the ambitions of the conservatives was to revert this trend by attempting to stimulate and intensify economic exchanges between different parts of the Empire. The solution they proposed was devised at the Imperial Economic Conference of 1923. It was to combine a zone of free trade inside the empire with protectionist measures at its borders. Nevertheless, when the conservatives came back to power in 1924 under the Prime Ministership of Stanley Baldwin, they didn't favour protectionist measures purely for tactical reasons. So they had to find other means of encouraging economic exchanges inside the Empire. The alternative they chose was to create a new institution, the Empire Marketing Board, whose key objective was to develop and promote commercial links within the British Empire by using, in particular, the relatively recent tools of marketing and advertising.

Interestingly, Rudyard Kipling had taken a genuine interest in cinema at the time. Not only was Kipling one of England's most famous writers but he was also - as you know - a vocal ideologue of the British Empire and a cousin of Stanley Baldwin. With this happy blend of ideological, literary, political and familial capital, he was able to obtain funding from the newly created Empire Marketing Board to make a film which would be written by him and directed by his friend, Walter Creighton, who knew nothing about cinema but with whom he had organized a British Imperial exhibition at Wembley in 1924.

It was exactly one week after Walter Creighton had been accepted as Film Director by the Empire Marketing Board that John Grierson, the founder of the British Documentary Film Movement, returned from the United States, to be more precise from Chicago, where he had been on a Rockfeller Fellowship. Grierson belonged to the first generation students, not in the domain of cultural studies and of public culture, as he would have surely been today, but in Mass Communication; and he was particularly interested in the propaganda possibilities the medium of cinema had opened up. Grierson managed to convince yet another fascinating character, Stephen Tallents, the Manager of the Empire Marketing Board, that he was just the man required for developing cinematographic propaganda. But Tallents had already committed himself to Kipling's friend, Walter Creighton, and hence it was difficult for him to obtain the authorization and funding for two films at the same time.

Nevertheless, John Grierson and Stephen Tallents had a bright idea. They knew that A.M. Samuel, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury had the governmental responsibility for the funding of films, and he had also authored a little-known literary masterpiece *The Herring: Its Effect on the History of Britain*. So they knew how to deal with him. And it is for this reason that the script of *Drifters*, the film that dealt with herring fishing. Later, this film was to become one of the most famous documentaries.

John Grierson had a second stroke of luck, too. It so happened that the film made by Kipling and his friend, turned out to be rather crass. Called *One Family*; it showed how different agricultural products were grown in different parts of the Empire. Its final scene showed how these products were ceremoniously brought to the Buckingham Palace where they were used for making a Christmas pudding for the King-Emperor. Moreover each of the colonies and of the dominions of the British Empire were incarnated and played, in the most patronizing way, by different high society ladies. I have not seen the film myself but according to the press reports of the time, it was not exactly a success and moreover it had cost an awful lot of money.

On the other hand, Grierson's film on herrings was a success. This was specially the case when it was shown for the first time in London, in 1929, at a cine club session attended by the whole intelligentsia - the Bloomsburry circle in particular, with people like Keynes, Virginia Wolf, and others. This initial success was mostly due to the fact that Grierson showed it alongside Sergei Eisenstein's masterpiece *Battleship Potemkin* that was also receiving its first viewing in England, in presence of the Russian filmmaker himself. Grierson knew the film well because it was him who had translated the subtitles for its first presentation in the United States. He had also been inspired by Einsenstein's montage technique for his own film. It should be noted that later on Grierson's film also had evinced some real interest among people outside the intelligentsia circle. What is certain is that Stephen Tallents considered it successful and that helped him to convince a few other enthusiastic civil servants about the potential use of the documentary film for government propaganda.

I'd like to emphasize that in this surrealistic competition between herrings and Christmas pudding, we encounter the moment of confrontation between two great cultural traditions of representations: one tracing back to ideology and aesthetics that had dominated the second half of the nineteenth century; and the other heralding a new style of representation that was beginning to impose from this period onwards. By itself this wasn't exceptional but despite the fact that Kipling's film had directly commemorated the greatness of the British Empire, it. was rejected by conservative politicians and civil servants who were not only staunch defenders of the British Empire (I am thinking here, not only of Stephen Tallents but also of Leo Amery) but who played an important role in the fight against socialism. And yet we find the same persons keen to patronize a creator, John Grierson, who was openly inspired by the films promoting Bolshevik Revolution.

Obviously, Grierson was not the only one who had sought inspiration from Eisenstein in a rather different ideological context. *Battleship Potemkin* was also the main film that Goebbels had asked filmmakers to emulate when the Nazis took control of the German cinema. And when Frank Capra was asked to take charge of American Army's cinematographic propaganda unit, it was Leni Riefenstahl's films that he was given to study. So what we see from these diverse crosscurrents is the emergence of a new international style not constrained or framed by the interests and ideological trends of specific milieu. What shocked Eisenstein was the fact that his film wasn't well received in his own country but the Nazi propagandists used it. Perturbed, he wrote a letter to the press in which he argued that his film techniques should not be transported to an alien Fascist context. In doing so, he demonstrated his faith in the inseparability of form and context. But history was to prove him wrong.

A very varied career

Let us now move to Independent India to examine the beginning of a documentary tradition there. But before doing so, I need first to give a few indications about the antecedents of this tradition while India still belonged to the British Empire. From an analytical point of view, this previous era can be divided into three periods.

The first period begins with the arrival of Maurice Sestier, an employee of Louis Lumiere, in Bombay in 1896; just one year after the first public showing of cinema in a Parisian café. For the next thirty years, there

were numerous Indian filmmakers including Save Dada (*The wrestlers*, 1898), Hiralal Sen (*Moving Pictures of Natural Scenes and Religious Rituals*, 1899) and others who made very short films - non-fictional in content - focusing on one or another aspect of Indian reality.

Nevertheless, the Indian filmmakers who played a leading role in the development and the institutionalisation of a documentary tradition in India from the thirties were mostly those who had returned from abroad like Grierson returning to England from the US and playing a crucial role in developing the British documentary film tradition. What is particularly interesting here is the fact that such a leading role was played by the people who were trained in the various different parts of the world where the cinema was developing:

D.G. Tendulkar, the official biographer of Mahatma Gandhi, who begun his career as a documentary filmmaker, was trained in the Soviet Union with Eisenstein. K.S. Hirlekar, founder of the Motion Picture Society of India, was trained at the UFA in Germany, one of the pioneering centres of the documentary tradition such as Kulturfilms. Trained in the Hollywood, Ezra Mir inspired by the American documentary tradition, *March of the Times*, for example.

Another filmmaker that I want to mention in this context is P.V. Pathy (Pittamandalam Venkatachalapathy), a Tamilian Brahmin, who is generally acknowledged as one of the most active players in development of non-fiction films in India. Pathy had gone to Paris as a student of Sylvain Lévy, a leading French Sanskritist. Pathy appears to have done a doctorate under Levy's direction on *The Contemporary Theatre of the Andhras* before becoming a student of film at Vaugirard He was particularly interested in non-fiction films.

In spite of various short lived attempts by the Indian filmmakers and producers to develop a tradition of non-fiction cinema in India during the thirties; the real impetus came from the British, as they needed to win Indian support during WWII. And it is at this point of time that some of the filmmakers directly associated to Grierson including Alex Shaw, Jack Holmes or James Beveridge came to India and organized there for the first time the institutional basis for the development of a regular documentary production with the assistance of Indian producers and directors.

The Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who regarded it as a British tool for war propaganda closed down the institution, the Information Films of India, established by the British just before independence. But it was reopened, a year later, in 1947, on the initiative of the Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel. Reportedly, one of the reasons for its reopening was the absence of any official agency to record the events around the newly won independence. Interestingly, one of the most successful documentaries to be shown during the first weeks of independence was an odd one called *India's Struggle for National Shipping* produced by the Scindia Steam & Navigation Co., a private company. It was made by P.V. Pathy and Paul Zils, a German filmmaker settled in India. Its success was due to the fact that it contained newsreel images about India and the nationalist movement, from the twenties onward.

Paradoxically, it was a German filmmaker who, for at least one decade, had become one of the better known, if not the best known, documentary filmmaker of independent India. Paul Zils introduced himself as someone who was trained in Germany but who had left his country before the WWII owing to the political situation. He had then travelled to Hollywood and different Asian countries, including Indonesia in 1940. When leaving Indonesia, a warship sank his boat but he was rescued by a boat of the Royal Indian Navy. This is how he was interned in India like all the other Germans who happened to be on the British Empire territory during the WWII. But, in 1946, Zils began working in India, first for the British propaganda as director of the external unit of the IFI and then for a dozen of years after independence, working both for the new Indian government and for international institutions including the UNESCO, as well as all sorts of

multinationals. In 1958, he returned to West Germany where he created his own production company and worked as a consultant to various Asian countries, particularly Sri Lanka, in order to help establish national institutions for production of documentary films.

What is surprising is that Zils named his company *Condor Film Production*, given the connotations associated with such a name in the thirties and the fact that he introduced himself as an opponent to the Nazis. It is this curious fact that led me to examine his biography more closely.

While holding the retrospectives of Zils films in Sri Lanka during the seventies, Director of the German Cultural Institute and during the eighties Director Max Muller Bhavan in Delhi in had said that Zils "got his training as a young filmmaker during the Golden Age of the German film before world war II." As it turns out, this Golden Age corresponds exactly to the period when German cinema was completely and strictly under Nazi control. Later, I found an interview that Zils gave towards the end of his life in which he boasted for the first time that he had had a privileged relationship with Goebbels when he worked for the UFA. What is still not very clear, owing to the diversity and vagueness of Zils' declarations on the topic, is the date and circumstances which apparently led him to defect from Nazism. This makes his personal case difficult to interpret. But whatever the case, the aspect of Zils' career is certainly significant for the fact that he managed to work for so many different patrons. It is somehow ironic to discover that the man we smiling on a photograph with Nehru, presenting him a film entitled *Hindustan Hamara*, is the same man who had successively worked in the service of the colonial expansion of Nazi Germany and of the British Empire and who was later funded by the West German government to contribute to the propaganda of different developing countries.

In spite of the fact that I have read a lot of information about this man and that I have interviewed the persons who probably knew him the best after the war, namely, Jag Mohan, Fali Bilimoria, Jehangir Bhowanagary and Mulk Raj Anand, I realize that every piece of information I have gathered about his career before the war stems from one single source: himself. But whatever the exact truth may be, the career of Paul Zils highlights a more general pattern. To give just one more example of it, I was surprised to learn that someone like Roberto Rossellini, before he made his famous film *Rome*, *Open City*, had previously made three propaganda films for the Fascist army with the assistance of Michelangelo Antonioni and in collaboration with Benito Mussolini's son. Such cases illuminate what seems to be one of the most characteristic features of the development of documentary cinema between the twenties and the sixties. Curiously, it seemed to transcend all existing ideological, cultural and national borders characterized by this period of history. So what such examples really illustrate is the manner in which a restricted number of filmmakers succeeded to impose themselves throughout most of the world, by mobilizing successfully almost all the possible forms of patronage that existed at the time.

The ambiguities of patronage

What is also interesting is that the filmmakers in the same network were working for very different causes but they were inspired by a common style of filmmaking, in different parts of the world. But does this necessarily imply that the ideological content of the films was in some way similar or ambiguous, owing to this proximity? Apparently, the answer would be in negative if one takes the example of compilation films made during the war. *London Can Take It*, for example, was a really a successful film at the beginning of the war in England. Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, both leading filmmakers of the British Documentary Film Movement, made it. It was full of images lifted directly from Nazi propaganda films. However, such images took obviously a completely different meaning in the new context. Nevertheless, the overall effect of the general circulation of images, styles, and film makers that characterized documentary filmmaking of this period should not be ignored, that it needs to be analyzed more carefully.

At the outset, I mentioned that Grierson had generally considered himself a progressive filmmaker. But this applies as well to the entire British Documentary Film Movement. It was, in fact, considered be a left-wing cultural movement though not everyone agreed about its degree of radicalism. Such a perception may be found not only among filmmakers, theorists and historians of the movement itself who generally did not hide their political sympathies; but also among audiences and film sponsors who often worried about the ideological leanings of filmmakers

Grierson and others had not only openly acknowledged their debt to the Soviet Union film makers but also had boasted themselves to be in the vanguard in England to show the real conditions of the working class in their films. In their direct style, the workers were able to vent their feelings frankly without any intermediaries. But what did not fit so well with these filmmakers' reputation was the fact that their films were so heavily funded either by conservative politicians or by multinationals that were accused of promoting new forms of imperialism. So, while analysing the content of the majority of these films, one must acknowledge this central paradox. Now the question is how to comprehend this paradox that obviously contradicts standard explanations both of patronage and of propaganda.

It would appear that nobody except perhaps a few radical Marxists and Grierson himself seem to have bothered much about this question until the seventies. Still, in a book written in 1988, we find a Canadian media specialist, Joyce Nelson, describing her horrified shock at the sudden revelation that Grierson was not in fact as progressive as he had appeared. The author suggests that from the beginning of his career, Grierson had always been a faithful servant of imperialism and that all his films had been thinly disguised propaganda tools.

More recently, there have been more subtle attempts to demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxon documentary films of this period were generally characterized less by a motivated propagandist message than by the skilful manner in which they smoothly avoided engaging all real political question; and it was precisely this skill that the patrons of such films particularly valued. It is certainly easy to agree with such an analysis if one sees some of these films today.

Nevertheless, both these interpretations seem somewhat anachronistic.

As a matter of fact, it does not matter much if these films appear devoid of social content today, what is important is to see if they were socially relevant at the time of their making. Similarly, it does not make sense to rediscover propaganda-based intentions not been hidden at the time as it did not seem to have deterred the majority of people from seeing the films as left wing when they were made. To give an example, Grierson was regularly suspected in spite of his very obvious political moderation (not to say: its political compromises) of being too close to the left for the taste of many of its potential sponsors. Not only that, during the cold war, he was nearly accused of betraying the West to the Soviet Union. To sum up, one perhaps cannot consider the meaning of documentary films either as a straight expression forwarding the interests of their patrons or as a subversion of the patrons' intentions on the part of left-wing filmmakers. The reality seems to be much more intricate.

When one looks more precisely at the way the patronage worked at the time, one generally finds that the key areas of tension were not between patrons attempting to impose their ideology on filmmakers and filmmakers trying to save desperately their artistic autonomy. Moreover, it happened quite often that filmmakers were their own producers, and also that some of them, including Beddington, Grierson, and Zils, had important functions in the institutions that employed them. As a consequence, the distinction between sponsors and filmmakers was often blurred. But in spite of this, the history of documentary filmmaking seems to suggest that the filmmakers were, in fact, pretty autonomous players. As a matter of fact, when the

sponsorship for documentary films stopped or was withdrawn, it had usually not to do with the content of the films.

What I wish again to stress here is the fact that such autonomy had nothing to do with filmmakers wanting to identify with an ideology of pure art; but rather as I suggested before, it was linked to their ability to convince others that they were best placed to know how to express their interests. So if one wants to understand exactly how the relationship between the filmmakers and their patrons worked, one cannot rely only on looking at the contents or even the styles of documentary films. What the documentary filmmakers really needed was their sponsors sharing with them the conception of art based on the notion that every film they made would be worth patronizing, however distant it may actually appear from the sponsors' initial expectations.

Such conception of art, ultimately based on the conviction that every work of art always expresses, no matter in the most indirect manner, the social and cultural background, the economic, political and economic interests or even the more individual expectation of its patrons and audiences, can't be reduced itself so easily to a particular cultural ideology, equally characteristic of a particular milieu and time. It is so because such conception of art has remained the main paradigm on which our understanding of practically any form art has been based in this century. But it is also precisely why one should consider such a conception with a pinch of anthropological salt. It is, at least, what I have tried to do in the case of the emergence of documentary film tradition in the British Empire and in Independent India.

Denis Vidal: